



A Conversation With Karen Sarjeant, LSC Vice President for Programs and Compliance

In a recent interview with Karen Sarjeant, LSC's Vice President for Programs and Compliance, she told *EJM* about her return to LSC and gave us an update of some of LSC's new and innovative programs.

***Equal Justice Magazine:* This is your second stint as Vice President for Programs. In the past several years, you have worked as a consultant conducting program evaluations of LSC funded and non-LSC funded programs, management reviews, and regional integration assessments. What brought you back to LSC?**

The short answer is I love this work and the people who do it. The longer answer is that I was offered an interesting

opportunity to join a newly hired senior management team that brought a range of different experiences to the challenges of working in a changing legal services community. LSC's President Helaine Barnett has begun several exciting initiatives such as LRAP, the Leadership Mentoring program, joint program visits, and a number of quality initiatives including revising LSC's Performance Criteria. I wanted to be a part of implementing these important pilot projects in our community. I also could not resist the opportunity to be

in a position to help implement a vision of strong legal services programs as full partners in emerging state justice communities. As a consultant, I worked with a significant number of programs, including working as an interim Executive Director for nine months with a program that was participating in a merger with two other legal services programs. Those experiences were extremely valuable to me as I got to see both the benefits and challenges of restructuring the delivery system and the many management and delivery benefits and challenges that come with larger, more complex programs. This opportunity, both to share what I have learned and to learn from the experiences of others, was one that I could not refuse. I know that our work at LSC will continue to support a vision of high quality legal services programs that are positioned to provide assistance in many different ways and to expanding numbers of people.

EJM: What are some of the challenges you foresee?

First, let me say what I think the challenges are for programs: I think that it is a daily challenge to manage a high quality legal services program. It does not just happen. It requires strong leadership and management, innovation, risk-taking, thoughtful advocacy, attention to compliance issues, resource development, strategic partnerships and effective knowledge of, and grounding in, ever-changing client communities. All of that takes time and resources and requires the involvement of staff with a wide range of skills and abilities. Today, our LSC-funded programs are larger and more complex to operate. There are more non-

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LSC funded programs than ever before and we expect our programs to achieve a level of integration in the delivery system that requires thoughtful and constant attention from many vantage points. Being able to do all of that effectively is a large set of challenges and programs work hard at all of these challenges every day. LSC has a significant role in providing the necessary support to assist programs in meeting these challenges. One way that we are providing that support is undertaking a redraft of the LSC Performance Criteria. These are guidelines for programs to use in developing and operating their offices and in evaluating their work and effectiveness. This redraft is being done with colleagues from within our community and is the first redraft since the inception of the LSC Performance Criteria in 1993.

Second, let me say what I think the challenges are for LSC: Our primary and ongoing long term challenge is to increase federal funding to allow programs to continue to provide quality legal services—the need continues to grow.

Additionally, as a funder, I believe that we need to be thinking of ways in which we can use our national role to help programs gain access to other resources. We need to always be cognizant of the impact of our oversight role and be deliberate and thoughtful about the administrative requirements that we impose on our programs, carefully balancing the need for oversight and reporting with the primary goal of service delivery.

At a programmatic level, a significant challenge at LSC is the provision of effective support to our programs now that they are bigger and more complex to manage. We need to be assisting programs in developing ways in which they can assess their own service delivery and progress toward established goals. We need to support efforts in the national community to provide training and support to leaders and managers in obtaining and constantly improving their leadership and management skills. We need to be thinking ahead about the future of legal services and what efforts are required today to support our programs tomorrow.

EJM: Technology is an area in which LSC has been investing in recent years. How has it transformed legal aid?

Without question, technology has been transformative in legal aid. When I first met with the LSC staff working with the Technology Initiative Grants (TIG), I told them that I

remembered the long debates we had at LSC in 1995 or 1996 about including in the grant assurances a requirement that each program have one 486 computer in order to

communicate its reporting requirements to LSC. Now, our programs are so far beyond that and technology is being used in new ways to deliver information and services to increasing numbers of clients. As recently as a few years ago, very few programs and communities had websites with public legal education materials. Today there are 50 statewide websites, with a range of information such as, how to apply for assistance from a local legal services program, interactive tools for pro se, document assembly guides for volunteer attorneys assisting legal aid clients, and a host of other information targeted to the needs of each local community. Programs around the country have collaborated on centralized intake systems and other collaborations have developed between legal services, court systems, universities, and law schools. A collaboration with the IRS on the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) has resulted in millions of actual dollars being made available to eligible persons. All of these partnerships are made possible in part because our programs have funds to

invest in technology and in the community.

EJM: LSC recently announced the launch of its Leadership Mentoring Pilot Program. Give us an overview of the program, the application process, and how you expect it to impact the next generation of legal services advocates.

This is a project that is especially important to me because at various points in my life, mentors have helped guide my way. During my years in legal services, I have had, and continue to have, the opportunity to be mentored by some of the brightest stars in our community. I know what the value of that mentorship has meant for me and I want to do what I can to see that similar mentoring experiences are made available to diverse, emerging leaders within our community. I was excited to hear that this project had been started by Helaine before I came and I am proud to have a role in helping to shape its development.

The LSC Leadership Mentoring Pilot Program is a true opportunity for our community to share the valuable experiences of so many folks with those who are at the beginning or midpoint of their career within legal services. Because the broader community has a responsibility to ensure leadership development within our community, the group of mentors and protégés was selected by a committee that has representation from LSC, the Leadership and Diversity Advisory Council, NLADA, Management Information Exchange, the ABA, and the National Association of IOLTA Programs.

Our goals for the Leadership Mentoring Pilot Program are to promote the deliberate cultivation of a diverse,

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trained and prepared corps of high quality leaders in the legal services community and to demonstrate that a deliberate and thoughtful approach to mentoring will be of benefit to our programs and to the larger community.

Many of us have been doing this work for 30 years or more and we need to ensure that we are identifying and nurturing a generation of diverse leaders for our community. This should be a deliberate undertaking that we are all involved in at every level of our community.

EJM: Another initiative that will benefit future legal aid lawyers is LSC's Pilot Loan Repayment Assistance Program (LRAP) which has received congressional funding. Tell us about this project.

We all know that many new lawyers who desperately want to work in legal aid are unable to because of their heavy educational debt loads. This project, also begun by

Helaine, hopes to demonstrate that access to an LRAP makes a difference in programs' ability to recruit and retain new lawyers.

All LSC funded programs were invited to submit an application to participate in the LSC Pilot Loan Repayment Program and 62 programs applied. LSC selected grantees to participate in the pilot project based on a number of factors related to recruitment and retention challenges. After selecting a slate of programs, LSC will select attorneys in those programs to participate in the Pilot LRAP. These attorneys must have outstanding annual debt service on law school loans of at least \$2,400. They must have no more than 36 months experience with the program. There are income and asset limitations for eligibility. Attorneys selected to participate in the LSC Pilot LRAP are eligible to receive loans up to \$5,000 annually for a three-year period. The LRAP debt will be forgiven by LSC at the end of each year. LSC plans to seek additional funding to expand and extend this project.

EJM: You have worked for more than 30 years as a legal services advocate in a variety of roles. To what do you credit your occupational longevity and commitment to equal justice issues?

From an early age, my parents, both by deeds and words, instilled in my sister and me a strong belief and ethic for social justice. My father was a community activist, a Baptist minister, a member of the Columbus City Council in the late 1950's and early 1960's, and

among other things, a participant in the historic March on Washington in 1963. My mother was a social worker and I

remember how hard she worked to make sure that the families in her caseload were given every possible resource available. They were both always involved in the social justice issues of those days and our house was often full of community people discussing the challenges of making our community welcoming to all persons who lived there. Both of their examples of being involved, caring about the community and being willing to always do what was needed without personal acknowledgement, made a big impact on me.

Over my years in legal services, I have had the opportunity to view and participate in this work from many different vantage points—as a “Reggie” (a Reginald Heber Smith Fellow), as a managing attorney, from a regional office, at one of the former national support centers, and from the national office of LSC. Each opportunity has been a building block that has prepared me for what I am doing now. And anyway, I love this work! ■